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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of a participatory management process in an older, public-sector bureaucracy with an extremely traditional, hierarchical, and entrenched culture. Into this culture, two separate projects were introduced: an employee involvement program using the quality circle concept and a task force that would design and implement an innovative operations system. The first section briefly describes how the task force was formed and what happened. The second section describes the outcome of the task force and the measures that were used to evaluate the outcome. The third section describes the results of a naturalistic inquiry in which the elements of the success of the task force process are examined in depth. The fourth section discusses some implications of the success of the task force. Appended are 7 references. (SI)

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USING PARTICIPATORY MANAGEMENT IN A TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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Participatory management is an increasingly popular process which has been adopted by many organizations, small and large, in both public and private sectors. It goes by various names, e.g., "Quality Circles", "Employee Involvement" and many others. Whatever the name, participatory management involves a more democratic method of decision making and problem solving, in which the employees involved "hands on" in an area have input into decisions and processes which relate to that area. The decision making and problem solving techniques used in participatory management are basic non-hierarchical processes such as brainstorming and consensus decision making. Evidence exists that the process of participatory management results in better quality decisions and increased productivity (Yager, 1981). However, some researchers have disputed the value of this process, and have found that the results are not as positive as they have been claimed to be (Mohrman and Novelli, 1985). Certain writers have found that the functioning of participatory management in any given organization is closely related to the culture of that organization (Abbot, 1987; Ferris & Wagner, 1985). Specifically, there is evidence that the open, democratic process of participatory management groups causes conflict with the hierarchical nature of the traditional organizational culture, and that this conflict can seriously undermine the effectiveness of these groups (Smeltzer & Kedia, 1985; Myer & Stott, 1985).

This paper describes the use of a participatory management

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process in an older, public sector bureaucracy with an extremely traditional, hierarchical, and entrenched culture. In this environment, decisions were typically made from the top down. Staff had little input into decisions made by managers. Mid-level managers had little input into decisions made by the executive group. Even the top executives were routinely subject to directives from the state capital, 100 miles away. Although there were some formal structures for staff and management to have input into decisions, the informal rules were such that this was not a viable practice. At various levels in the hierarchy, meetings would be held to supposedly make decisions. It was almost always the case that most decisions had been made before or after a meeting was held, usually because the information necessary to make the decision was available only to a select group. This meant that the staff involved had the choice of agreeing with or opposing the decision, instead of participating in forming the decision. Opposing a management decision was not a popular action. Those who routinely opposed decisions were labeled obstructive, lost their credibility, and were subject to other forms of negative sanction. This cultural atmosphere was so entrenched that many employees, staff and management alike, took it for granted and had long ago given up any attempt to participate in the functioning of the facility in any meaningful way.

Into this culture, two separate projects were introduced. One was a general effort to introduce participatory management into the facility in the form of an employee involvement program which used the quality circle concept. The other project was a task force

which was created for the specific purpose of designing and implementing an innovative operations system. It is this task force which is the major focus of this paper. This task force used many of the same techniques and processes as the employee involvement program, but was never formally part of that effort, and was not labeled such at any time.

This paper has four sections. The first briefly describes how the task force was formed and what happened. The second section describes the outcome of the task force and the measures that were used to evaluate the outcome. The third section describes the results of a naturalistic inquiry in which the elements of the success of the task force process are examined in depth. The fourth section discusses some implications of the success of the task force, with emphasis on the use of participatory management in a traditionally structured environment.

THE TASK FORCE

A task force was formed at a large residential facility for the developmentally disabled to address the inadequacy of client clothing at the facility, and to redesign all aspects of the system of handling clothing. The symptoms were unacceptable, poor client appearance, and a cumbersome, time consuming laundry and purchasing process. The task force was formed by the executive committee of the facility under the leadership of one of the deputy directors. The membership of the task force was chosen by the deputy, and represented all jobs which had any relationship to the problem, with direct care staff being in the majority. Members were sent letters notifying them of their assignment to the task force.

The group began meeting with the problem generally defined: every aspect of the clothing process was unsatisfactory in some way. It was charged with the task of defining the problem in more specific terms, developing recommendations for redesign of the system, and implementing the new design. The group leader (the deputy) set down ground rules for how the group was to operate. They were: 1. ANY idea, concept, solution, etc. can be proposed. 2. Attack the problem, not the person. 3. Everyone's participation is essential. 4. The administration commits to follow-up. 5. Decisions will be made by consensus. 6. No rank - everyone has equal say.

Through an iterative process that involved a combination of brainstorming, open discussion, and discussion to consensus, the group defined the problems and created five areas of resolution. The group divided into five subgroups based on these areas and each subgroup developed a set of recommendations. All the recommendations were integrated into a final list of 13 recommendations. The group presented its recommendations to the executive committee and they were approved. All of this took approximately 6 months.

The group then dissolved and was reformed into an implementation team. This team included some members of the original group who had volunteered to participate, and also some new members. The implementation team was charged with carrying out the recommendations. These included major physical plant changes (installing laundry rooms with washers and dryers on every living unit) as well as major procedural changes in the handling and purchasing of clothing. The implementation team was in effect for approximately 6 months, during which time the bulk of the changes were carried out.

One of the recommendations of the task force was the formation of a standing clothing committee which was to monitor and follow up on the changes, and provide ongoing support and problem solving to the living units as needed. That committee was formed at the same time as the implementation team, with considerable overlap in membership. Since the changes were phased in to each living unit over time, the standing committee began its work with each living

unit as the implementation team left it.

THE "SUCCESS" OF THE PROJECT

This entire project was defined as a "success" in three ways.

1. It was a subjective success. The members of the original task force and the implementation team were enthusiastic to the end, despite the fact that there were rough spots and expressed moments of discouragement. The self esteem of group members was high and there was pride expressed in the accomplishments of both the task force and the implementation team. These feelings were in direct contrast to the general organizational climate, in which worker morale was generally low and success and pride in one's work was a scarce commodity.

2. The new design as outlined in the recommendations was implemented on or ahead of schedule.

3. The new design accomplished the desired results. The program evaluation department conducted a modified time series study in which changes in composition and condition of client wardrobes were measured. The study also included independent observer judgements of client appearance. Results showed that six months after the system redesign was complete, both wardrobes and appearance had improved significantly.

THE ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

A naturalistic inquiry method was used to discover and describe the elements of success of the process. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to elicit data. All task force members were interviewed after the new system had been implemented. An inductive, iterative method was used (Greene, et al, 1987) to analyze the interview responses with respect to task force members perceptions of the success of the process.

There were several common themes which emerged from the interviews. These were concepts and ideas that almost everyone mentioned, and that were mentioned repeatedly. The themes were: 1. Administrative follow-up/commitment. 2. Competence and appropriateness of task force membership. 3. Leadership and facilitation. 4. Openness/inclusion/equality. 5. Fit between problem and committee structure and process. 6. The experience of working on the committee.

Administrative Follow-up and Commitment

One of the first issues mentioned by everyone was the that of administration's interest in the problem. People felt that the top administration was serious about solving this issue. The fact that the deputy director chaired the committee was perceived as a

indication of seriousness.

The idea that the top administration supported a change in this area had a number of different effects on group members. Some said that it induced them to work harder on the problem. Others said it gave them a feeling of hope. It was realized in the course of working at meetings that the decisions being made in the room had only one more "layer" to go before they reached the top and could become reality. This was responsible for much motivation and enthusiasm.

Many people expressed that fear of lack of follow-up is what had inhibited them from wanting to contribute ideas in the past. Several people expressed a fear of being "taken" in this process in a particular way - that is - they would be asked to try to change something and nothing would come of it. Several people expressed this as almost a vulnerability - that contributing ideas for improvement was something that made them break out of a shell and take a risk. To not have the ideas acted on or taken seriously was such a disappointment that some felt they didn't want to try again. Someone said, "I got the [Task Force] memo and I thought - oh, this will be like everything else, well, maybe I'll try once more. Now I"m glad I did". No one expected that their ideas would be acted on exactly. Everyone mentioned compromise and the importance of agreement. One person said - "There were lots of compromises. It didn't go all your way. But the whole group made the decisions". The important issue to these respondents was not to get their "own way", but that whatever the final decision, there

would be follow-up - something would change.

Competence and Appropriateness of Task Force Membership

Almost everyone expressed the idea that the people on the task force were well suited to solving the problems at hand. Having the majority of the group be direct care staff was viewed as positive because it was important to have people there who "would actually be doing the work--actually carrying out this plan". It was stated over and over again that these were the people who knew what the problems were - who knew the reality of the situation as it existed. When it came time for solutions, they were the ones who would have a good idea if something would work or not. Indeed it was the direct care staff which provided much of the input regarding possible barriers to implementation of the new system and allowed the group to anticipate many of the problems which would be faced during implementation.

On the other hand, it was also expressed that having all levels and all areas represented was very important. It gave everyone a chance to see each other's point of view. Many times just the process of sharing job descriptions (something that happened fairly early in the process) was enough to broaden someone's viewpoint. Many people expressed that their perspective on the problem as well as their view of appropriate solutions was changed through hearing someone's point of view from a different area or level of hierarchy.

The importance of communication between different levels of hierarchy was something that many people mentioned. They said that it worked both ways - "the bottom got a chance to see the top and the top got a chance to see the bottom". Several people commented that the deputy's perspective was changed by actually engaging in the process with the group rather than just "reading the recommendations that the group had made." On the other hand, the deputy had a lot to offer the group because he had an overview of the situation which others did not have.

Leadership and Facilitation

Many people expressed that the group had good leadership. Several people stated that the chair had the ability to "sell" ideas well. Some meant in an internal way - relieving doubt within the group as to the feasibility of a certain idea. Others said that the chair was a good salesman of group ideas to people outside the group - to the director and the rest of the executives. It was the feeling of task force members that the sales ability was partly a result of the deputy's effective personality, and partly a result of his position as second in command of the facility.

Another issue mentioned was the chair's ability to generate enthusiasm and creativity. Respondents stated that it was obvious that neither the chair nor anyone else in the group had preconceived ideas about the outcome of the process, and that the chair was able to trust and let of control of the group. Members felt that this contributed to their ability to be creative.

There was one negative comment about leadership style in the interviews, and that was that the selection process was very autocratic. A memo was sent informing the participants that they had been chosen, rather than inviting their participation.

Openness/Inclusion/Equality

This theme ran throughout all the interviews. People talked a lot about the freedom they felt at meetings to say whatever they wished. Most people felt that without this freedom, solutions could not have been reached. This freedom was very stimulating, and kept the "minds working hard" for solutions.

Their were several key elements to this freedom. One was that the outcome of the process was open, and no one really knew what the specific results would be - there was a real sense of working together to solve the problem and create a solution. The atmosphere was free from fear in three ways. The first was that there was no personal blame for the present state of affairs. The group focused on "solutions now versus blame for past failure". This meant that people felt free to name the problems openly. The second was that no one was attacked or ridiculed for anything they said within the group - either for having an unpopular idea or perhaps a suggestion that was not of high quality. Not judging what other people said was one of the ground rules and it was strictly followed. The third way in which the atmosphere was free from fear

was that there was no sense that punishment would occur later, from above, for unpopular things said at the meetings. This was mainly because no one in anyone's direct chain of command was a member of the group. A result of this free atmosphere was that people felt that they heard each other and learned from each other, and that this contributed to the quality of their ideas.

Another element in this theme was "active participation". The process encouraged people to participate, therefore the group got the benefit of everyone's ideas. This happened mainly because of the "go round" technique during brainstorming and during some elements of the discussion. This was a diverse group, and many had never been in a problem solving group before. They were not used to speaking up. The go round encouraged them to participate. Some reported that they were "not great talkers" and that "going around the room helped people like me to speak up". Everyone felt the benefit of it and even people who had no trouble talking commented on it. One "talker" said "Everyone spoke up - it was so encouraging - some were more silent than others but no one was always silent".

Fit Between Problem, Solution, and Task Force Structure and Process

This theme referred to the nature of the problem and some of the elements inherent in the process. Everyone said how time consuming the process was. But all agreed that the time was necessary for a problem of this scope. The nature of the problem was such that the whole facility was at "the end of its rope", and

any solutions were necessarily going to affect everyone in the entire facility. People indicated that they were willing to spend this kind of time on that kind of problem. Several indicated strongly that this process wasn't appropriate for everything.

Because the problem was so large and unwieldy, it was essential that the group have a working structure that allowed it to tackle the problem in an organized way. People reported that they felt that the structure was organized, yet flexible. The group was "task oriented", had a "clear purpose" (although the solutions were not always clear!), it had a "clear beginning and end", and took a "step by step approach to the problem". The essential elements named were a working, flexible, and realistic agenda for each meeting, as well as an atmosphere which was comfortable and yet "no nonsense". This made the task force "a pleasure" to be on, even though it was "bogged down" at times, due to the difficult nature of the issues.

The Experience of Working on the Task Force

any people expressed a lot of feelings about being on the task force. Most of these feelings were positive. Most reported that they felt excited , challenged, and stimulated. Almost everyone said that it was a learning experience. Working with people from all over the facility gave most the realization that everyone had problems and the feeling that "we're all in it together". Many reported feeling that they had a real stake in "how it came out". Many reported that they had the feeling that

they really had something to offer, and that this was an unusual work life. No one used the word self-esteem, but it was clear that that's what they were talking about.

Some expressed a let down feeling after the task force ended, and others expressed a feeling of nervous anticipation to see if the solutions could really work. Those people on the committee who were also on the implementation team were very encouraged by how the implementation was going, but they stated that they kept "waiting for the other shoe to drop", based on their experience in the past. Some could hardly believe that it was working so far. "You mean we finally did something right?" This comment was particularly telling as it also related to self-esteem. It was obvious from these comments that failure was the expectation and success was a surprise.

THE SUCCESS OF A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS IN A TRADITIONAL CULTURE

The elements of success articulated as a result of the interviews can be grouped into two categories. The first is organizational. These elements affected the way the task force related to the rest of the organization and the way the structure of the organization affected the task force. The second category was process. The elements in this category affected the way the task force functioned as a group. Selected elements from both categories contribute to the understanding of how this task force operated. Two organizational elements that were particularly important were: 1. Administration commitment to follow-up, and 2.

Task Force connected directly to the Director of the facility.

These elements point to some inconsistencies that are evident when a process such as this is used within an environment that is traditional and hierarchical. First of all there are credibility barriers to be overcome when a process like this is used in a traditional organizational culture. Employees in such an environment are used to being told what to do. They are not used to being consulted or asked their opinion, much less be asked to serve on a task force charged with redesigning an entire operation. A suspicion exists that if they are part of something, it can't possibly go anywhere. In addition, many quality circle groups have had trouble in the area of problem definition (Mohrman and Novelli, 1985). Management frequently wishes to retain control over what is defined as a problem, therefore, a participatory group which defines problems itself may or may not have them taken seriously by management. In this case, the problem was previously and universally defined. Everyone on every level at the facility was frustrated and discouraged by the problem. So the issue of control over definition was not operating here. The initial suspicion of the task force not being taken seriously was dispelled after a few meetings.

Two other salient points were operating here. One was, in addition to the problem being universally defined, it was also universally baffling, and management genuinely had no preconceived agenda for a solution. Management was truly at the end of its rope about the issue. This was combined with the fact that the facility

was under pressure from a regulatory mandate to solve the problem. So the problem could not under any circumstances be ignored any longer. This was experienced by task force members as very empowering, because the members knew that they had to come up with a solution, that no one had any better ideas than they did about how to solve the problem, and that one way or another, management had to act.

The issue of being directly connected to the director also contributed to dispelling the fear that management would not follow through on task force suggestions. Because the deputy director chaired the group, the task force was only one layer away from the director. It was assumed that if the task force made a decision, only one more person had to be convinced before that decision could become a reality. This pointed to one of the great ironies in the process. There was considerable initial opposition from middle management to the recommendations developed by the task force. However, due to the extremely hierarchical structure of upper and middle management at this facility, no one in the middle management group felt free to oppose these recommendations once the director had approved them. Therefore, these democratically developed suggestions were more or less imposed on the middle management group in an autocratic manner which was typical of the culturally defined method for decision making at this facility.

The other group of success elements were process elements which related to the ground rules for group functioning set by the deputy director, as well as the make up of the group. Several

important process elements were : 1. No attack or personal blame for past problems. 2. No negative sanctions for anything said at meetings. 3. Participation by all encouraged through active means. 4. No one in anyone's direct chain of command in group. These ground rules represented an attempt by group leadership to counteract some of the negative influences of the traditional organizational culture. In this particular facility, the culture dictated that when employees stepped outside their roles to make a criticism or even a suggestion, they would be subject to subtle or overt negative sanctions. Another element of the traditional culture was placing blame on others. Fear and avoidance of blame was a controlling factor in many employee behaviors. The ground rules of this group were set in an attempt to counteract the effects of a culture which was not conducive to an open, democratic process. The issue of blame was discussed openly, and participation was encouraged actively. The fact that no one's direct supervisor was in the group forestalled fears of possible future repercussions for comments made in the group.

CONCLUSION

Presented here was an example of a participatory management group which functioned successfully in a traditional, hierarchical organizational culture. There were several factors contributing to its success. First, the nature of the problem was universally defined by all levels as important and all groups had a vested interest in solving the problem. Management was under outside

pressure to solve this problem and the solution was elusive. Therefore, management had no preconceived notion of the outcome of the task force process. Second, due to the structure of the task force - its direct connection to the director of the facility through the deputy director - its decisions and recommendations could be acted on as soon as the director's approval was obtained. This reinforced task force member's motivation to continue functioning at a productive level. Third, the ground rules for group functioning and the leadership of the group made a direct and overt attempt to counteract the elements of the traditional culture which were not conducive to an open, participatory style. Finally, the task force was relatively short lived, and focused on a specific issue. The group in all of its transitions functioned for about 2 years. Research on quality circles has indicated that even ongoing groups with no natural ending have average lifespans considerably shorter than this (Abbot, 1987; Meyer & Stott, 1985). This group had a natural ending which gave participants a sense of closure and a feeling of accomplishment.

As successful as this task force was in accomplishing its purpose using an open style, its functioning within the traditional culture of the facility points to some serious limitations of the participatory management process. It is important to note here that the formal employee involvement program which was introduced at the about the same time as the task force, and which is still ongoing, has not been an unqualified success. Although there have been some successful projects, the program has been plagued by many of the same problems which the literature reports are due to the

conflict between a traditional organizational culture and the open, participatory management process. These problems have included extreme lack of trust, as well as lack of follow-up on recommendations due to management's unwillingness to give up control. Many of the quality circle groups in the formal employee involvement program have been short lived and fragmented. The two major unions representing most of the employees at the facility eventually discontinued their involvement with the program due to lack of trust. In addition to the lack of success of the formal employee involvement program, there is no evidence that the success of the clothing task force was at all inspirational in transforming management practices at this facility, nor that it made any inroads by example in changing the dominant culture. This is an important illustration of the limitations of participatory management. This experience shows that under certain conditions, participatory management can work even within a traditional organizational culture, but that without major transformations of the culture itself, a generalized effort to incorporate the process will not necessarily meet with success.

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